Turkey’s Foreign & Security Policy: The Crossroads Between Israel, Arab Neighbours and European Union in Turkey’s Foreign Policy

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Abstract:
As the Turkish ruling, mild Islamist Justice and Development Party’s popularity increased and Ankara was tightening its relations with Arab neighbours, the West started to speculate about Turkey’s changing direction from the West to the East. A model story can be observed by the escalating tension between Turkey and Israel, for a long time seen as close partners. The cooling down of their relations serves as litmus test of Turkey’s foreign policy transformation, where Ankara’s redefinition of strategy and role took place. It portrays the changed strategy and discourse of Turkey’s foreign policy and tries to make connection between the recent developments both in the Middle East region and European Union.

The work aims to answer these questions: What kind of foreign policy transformation can we observe in Turkey? Does Turkey pursue any hidden agenda, or is it only following a well-balanced approach? Is there any connection between Turkish disappointment with European Union membership prospects and turning its attention to its Arab neighbours?

Keywords: Turkey’s foreign policy and strategy, Turkey’s changed discourse, Israel, Arab neighbours, Middle Eastern region, European Union
Introduction
For quite some time, many in the West feared that Turkey had shifted from its Western trajectory and embarked on the Eastern direction. This shift is often put in connection with Turkish ruling, mild Islamist Justice and Development Party, or AKP. At the same time, the switch of sides is repeatedly attributed to the Turkish disappointment on its way to full membership in the European Union. Although both of these factors have significant implications in relation to the new Turkish foreign policy, the weight they are often assigned, is too heavy and their focus is overestimated. When looking closer at the current Ankara’s foreign policy, other co-existing elements have to be acknowledged and necessary connections between them and AKP and EU have to be made. This article provides an overview of the complexity of those elements.

The work begins with analyzing Turkey’s relations with Israel which serves as an exemplary illustration of Turkish foreign policy transformation, mapping the three milestones in the recent Turkish-Israeli deterioration in relations. From a bilateral affair, the research goes on to a bigger picture, incorporating Turkish stagnating situation in the EU accession negotiations process and Ankara’s gradual proximity to its Arab neighbours. These foreign policy realities are then followed by the concluding remarks on Turkish foreign policy and its concept, where the basis for Turkey’s actions in the international affairs is further depicted and summarized. The article provides a foundation for, and in the conclusion, answers the research questions: What kind of foreign policy transformation can we observe in Turkey? Does Turkey pursue any hidden agenda, or is it only following a well-balanced approach? Is there any connection between Turkish disappointment of European Union prospects and turning its attention to its Arab neighbours?

Turkish-Israeli disconnection: a cascading cooling down of relations
Since the establishment of the State of Israel, Turkey and Israel always enjoyed warm economic and military relations, notwithstanding Turkey’s occasional criticism on behalf of Israel’s Palestinian occupation. However as of 2008, the bilateral affairs began to deteriorate rather swiftly. In late December Israel launched “Operation Cast Lead”, commonly known as the Gaza war, which lasted three weeks. Here Israeli military took Hamas-controlled Gaza by surprise and responded to numerous rocket attacks targeting Israel. In Turkish perception this was a stab in the back as Ankara was the intermediary of Israeli-Syrian peace talks and at the time of the operation’s launch, a serious progress between the two counterparts had been made. “By December 2008 Israel and Syria were able to resolve nearly 95 percent of their differences” (Ben-Meir, 2011, p. 2). Also, since June 19th 2008 there had been Egyptian-mediated six-month ceasefire that was very fragile but extendable. Ankara was in
direct contact with Hamas and saw a potential for peace in Gaza (Cordesman, 2009, p. 83-84). Four
days before the beginning of the war, Israeli Prime Minister Olmert was in Turkey participating at the
5th round of the Israeli-Syrian indirect talks and left with – unfulfilled – promise of informing Erdogan
about official Israeli stance on Israel-imprisoned Gazan political figures (Cordesman, 2009, p. 82-83).
That is why under the conditions back then, Israeli offensive on (Hamas targets in) Gaza shocked
Turkey. There might have even been a feeling of betrayal, when Israel did not have the decency to
brief Turkey on its intentions. Of course, if Tel Aviv had done so, it would have risked loosing the
element of surprise so from a military strategy point of view, this is somehow understandable. On the
other hand, all the effort that Turkish diplomats were putting into a peace process was suddenly worth
nothing and this is not something that can be put aside easily.

This was very disappointing for Turkey because of two reasons. Firstly, if Turkey was able to mediate
a peace between the two states of Israel and Syria who have been adversaries for more than half a
century, it would have strengthened its position as a rising regional power. Secondly, the bilateral
peace would have had far-reaching consequences in the whole Middle Eastern region causing the
peace to spread out in the best case scenario, and minimizing the security threats between the enemy
states in the worst. Either way, it would be a win-win outcome as the security situation would improve
for the region, as well as for Turkey itself. Instead of that Turkey found itself in a lose-lose position.
The way Israel acted in December 2008 could be interpreted by the outside observer – meaning
everyone outside of Israel – and especially by Turkey involved as honest broker that the Jewish state
was not being honest and serious in its peace intentions. Here, on these very grounds, the solid
relationship started to break apart. From the humanitarian aspect, Turkish officials labeled Israeli
military actions in Gaza as “crime against humanity” (Cordesman, 2009, p. 84). Gaza infrastructure
fell into a dilapidated condition, characterized also as open-air prison and high number of Palestinian
human casualties was worrisome. From a bilateral diplomatic relations standpoint, Turkey started to
see Israel less as a trustworthy, close ally sharing the same values and more as a secretive and arrogant
international player that is executing disproportional use of force without any consequences. An
international relations expert aptly notes: “As the Turks see it, Israel has acted as if it is accountable to
no one and independent of everyone” (Ben-Meir, 2011, p. 2).
Ankara’s struggle with digesting the lost momentum was clearly showcased during the 2009 Annual
World Economic Forum Meeting in Davos. The panel called “Gaza – The Case for Middle East
Peace” witnessed one of the sharpest opinion exchanges in its history. During the dialogue Turkish
Prime Minister Erdogan adopted a humanitarian point of view and blamed Israel for the disastrous
conditions and bloodshed of Palestinian Gazans. Israeli President Shimon Peres defended his country’s actions by speaking with a loud voice, to which Erdogan responded by saying “I feel that you perhaps feel a bit guilty and that is why you perhaps have been so strong in your voice, so loud. Well you kill people ... and I find it very sad that people applaud what you have said because there are many people who have been killed and I think it is very wrong ...” (World Economic Forum, 2009).

The last straw for Turkey in relation to Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the attitude of the State of Israel came in the form of the 2010 Mavi Marmara incident. The actions of Israel in this regard implied serious political cooling down between the two states, whose relations did not recover until today. To shed light on the episode and its discrepancies, the United Nations “Palmer Report” documented the events on the Turkish-led aid flotilla. It exonerated Israel from the blame saying it acted in a legitimate self-defense, while condemning its “unreasonable” measures and “excessive” use of force resulting in, “unacceptable” loss of lives of eight Turkish citizens and one Turkish-American (Palmer, 2010, p. 4) and “significant mistreatment of passengers” (Palmer, 2010, p. 61).

Although internationally substantiated, inside Turkey, the public resentment against Israeli practices was wide-spread. Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan stated: “We have downgraded diplomatic relations with Israel to the second secretary level. We have also suspended trade, military and defense industry relations, and different sanctions are to come” (Euronews, 2011). The vast diplomatic turmoil produced a set of three Turkish demands, under whose fulfillment the bilateral relations could get back on the recovery track. Those requested demands are that Israel issues an official apology for the deaths, provides financial compensation to the victims’ families and lifts the blockage of Gaza once and for all (The Economist, 2011). Until today the relations did not get to their earlier state. The third Turkish demand is more of a long-term commitment than sine qua non in the short run. Israel officially declared its regret for what had happened (Koplow & Sasley, 2012, p.1) and recently offered compensation to the raid victims amounting to £ 4 million. (Urquhart, 2012) However Turkey insists on the exact wording and for Ankara regret and apology is not the same. Not only is it a question of honor (Mete Cubukcu, in: Euronews, 2011), the strength and impact of the two words differs. Inside Israel, many citizens would not have a problem to apologize for the Mavi Marmara incident (Bar’el, 2011), the issues at stake here are domestic realities of politics and military, and international perception of Israel, especially by its not so friendly regional neighbours. In other words, Israel can’t afford to be viewed as a weak actor by others, for whatever reason; and the same applies to its defense forces. Behind closed door the criticism might have been voiced after all, as the military leaders
indicted by the Turkish court to be responsible for the Mavi Marmara happenings, had retired from the military right after the operation took place (Kershner, 2012).

Even if the Gaza incursion was a breaking point in Turkish-Israeli relations, a tipping point from which we can spot a declining tendency, it is not solely the Israeli conduct that is the single determining factor in this downfall. The other influencing elements are the change of the Middle Eastern realities, domestic evolution inside Turkey and different foreign policy considerations and objectives. At the same time we have to acknowledge that Turkish-Israeli relations were not always in the uphill direction. Until 1990’s the alliance always showed signs of a “fluctuating pattern”, except the “honeymoon” period between 1990’s and 2000 (Ulutas, 2010, p. 2) and getting back to the sinusoid standard until the breaking point of 2008 events.

Since the establishment of Israel, what bound Turkey and Israel was the region full of instability in the middle of which they found themselves. Regional hostilities and threat perception was what they shared. Since the Cold War’s outburst those threats were Soviet Union practices and the rise of Arab nationalism. That is why Turkey and Israel, the only two democratic countries in the region started to cooperate in military matters and became allies. However for over three decades afterwards, Turkish politicians distanced themselves from Tel Aviv in order to win their Arab neighbours over. Then when the bipolar world system collapsed, Turkey had to face regional anti-secular regime spill-over attempts as well as Kurdish nationalism schemes, involving also surrounding states, and Turkish-Israeli rapprochement took place.

Since the start of the new millennium, multiple internal changes happened inside Turkey. Military-influenced politics have been replaced by the priority of economic growth. Military leaders became limited in their actions while Ankara witnessed the rise of the civilian politicians. This transformation is also in accordance with the EU membership pre-conditions that Turkey has been aiming for. In 2003, the parliamentary elections were won by Islam-inspired Justice and Development Party, in power until today.

As Turkish economy has been growing, its international relevance was enhanced by the prospect of EU membership and the region has shown signs of greater stability\(^1\); all this made Turkey more confident and ambitious. Its foreign policy objective is to become a strong regional power in a politically stable and economically integrated Middle East with close ties with its neighbours, which is

\(^1\) The period portrayed here is from 2003 until 2010.
coming along nicely. On its trajectory it can be assumed that to certain extent “Israel has gone from being a vehicle for Turkish ambitions to being an obstacle to them” (Alterman & Malka, 2012, p. 119) and we can observe that in official relations “cooperation and friendship have been replaced with public accusations, threats and animosity” (Alterman & Malka, 2012, p. 119).

Thus a former military-based close linkage between the two states has been gradually outweighed by deepening economic relations. The official Turkish discourse and general public opinion has become more pro-Palestinian. But to what degree Erdogan’s harsh expressions addressed to Israeli counterparts are merely a publicity stunt remains hidden. What is obvious is the recent clash of current visions of Ankara and Tel Aviv on the Middle Eastern region. Due to its position in the Arab-Israeli conflict, Israel has always pursued a policy to sacrifice international law and to be content with regional fragmentation and more or less regional isolation in order to achieve its own security. On the other hand, Turkey has been striving to follow a strategy where the Middle Eastern region would reach political stability and economic interconnectedness.

The European Union factor

“Europe has been an object of desire as well as a source of frustration for Turkish national identity in a long and strained history” (Ahiska, 2003, p. 351). This statement still perfectly applies to realities of today’s relations between Turkey and the EU. Although Turkey’s journey to EU membership has been exceptionally long and is far from over, its significant internal reforms have paid off. “EU has been the engine of change in Turkey, ... we benefited tremendously and we would like to continue with this transformation, that is good for Turkish people” stated Turkey’s Finance Minister Mehmet Simsek (Simsek, in: BBC, 2010). The role of EU conditionality could be characterized as an inspiration and an engine for change. But it would be condescending to assume that the EU accession criteria are the only factor behind the reforms. Ankara realizes that the reforms are beneficial for the country and will continue in their application regardless of the accession process. At the same time, system transformation is an evolutionary process that would happen even without the EU patronage. However it is important to stress the speed and thoroughness of Turkey’s metamorphosis, which the EU-motivation has brought on. At the same time, purely the EU prospect raises Turkey’s international attractiveness, which serves to bring in vast investment. The status of a candidate country is very important for Turkey as well. Ankara likes to stand out as both European and Muslim/Middle Eastern player that enables it to occupy a unique position in international affairs, reaping the benefits in all kinds of fields, especially over the last decade. This image therefore cannot be moved to the back seat. Additionally, along with becoming better off on multiple fronts (booming economy, enhanced
democracy and rule of law), Turkish national identity has been saturated with the sense of pride, which makes Ankara speak with a louder voice in international affairs.

When it comes to Ankara’s proximity towards its Arab neighbours, it can be traced back to EU influence. Firstly, Turkey’s foreign policy vision for the Middle Eastern region targets political stability and economic integration encompassing “free movement of goods and people from the city of Kars to the Atlantic, and from Sinop to the Gulf of Aden” (Bagci, 2011, p. 150). Its resemblance with the EU project is obvious. Secondly, within EU conditionality Turkey can enter the Union only after its borders have been secured. Turkey’s ‘zero problems with the neighbours’ foreign policy approach brings greater economic opportunities while also addressing the issue of security in its turbulent region. At the same time, the required economic reforms helped Turkey become a vital market economy, although vulnerabilities remain. As the business environment optimizes, so are the business actors looking for new opportunities. That is why tightening economic relations with Arab neighbours come as no surprise – especially in times of financial crisis in the Euro-zone – which represents a third element of the EU influence. And lastly, Turkey’s increased significance in the region can be partly credited to the Union, as its Arab neighbours started to attach more regional importance to Ankara once the accession negotiations opened. Moreover, now Turkey is seen as a model of Muslim democracy by the region’s elites and being looked up to by those in the Arab streets.

In sum, EU can be viewed both as an enabler of Turkey’s recently obtained role of regional stabilizer using its soft power, and as an incentive for Ankara to become more attractive for EU because of this very role (Bilgic, 2009, p. 164). However Turkey’s “improved relations with [the] neighbours do not have anything to do with [disappointment of the accession negotiations process]” (Simsek, in: BBC, 2010), but rather as a result of increasing Euro-scepticism after 2005 Turkey developed a more nationalistic and autonomous foreign policy, particularly to its neighbours (Eralp, 2009, p. 209). Still the EU agenda would be pursued anyway as they are beneficial for the Euro-Asian state. And with the stronger economy and voice in the region and world, Turkey would go on to follow its own agenda as well.

Ankara and Brussels need each other as a mutual anchor due to certain risks on the horizon. Firstly, although the Turkish foreign policy tries to follow a well-balanced approach, to have ‘zero problems with neighbours’ is rather unrealistic in today’s unstable Middle Eastern region whose chronic problems will not be resolved any time soon. The fact that Turkey had to choose sides and oppose its
ally Iran in connection with the Syrian crisis shows that the international affairs are not always played by the book. Therefore Turkey needs an EU anchor in its foreign policy considerations, as it might just happen that Ankara overestimates its possibilities.

Secondly, internationally transparent policy is confronted with the domestic ever-present fear over ‘different agenda’\(^2\) that AKP might have (Carkoglu, in: Al Jazeera, 2011). Therefore an EU anchor that serves as the engine and watchdog of political reforms is particularly crucial to safeguarding a consolidated democracy which is in Turkey’s national interest. Thirdly, close relations with the EU are absolutely vital for Turkey. Ankara still proudly claims that it will not settle for anything less than full membership in the club, but there is a risk that with persistent stalemate in the accession negotiations, EU membership will eventually become too small and too limiting for ‘the land beneath the half moon’ and its ambitions. Therefore, a crisis inside EU has enhanced its needs for a Turkish anchor to thrive on its numerous opportunities.\(^3\)

**Concluding remarks on Turkish foreign policy**

Under the Justice and Development Party, Turkish foreign policy has embarked on a transformation journey and has now reached its tipping point with current Foreign Minister Davutoglu coming into office. Turkey’s international image has been converted in multiple ways. From security state to trading state, from hard power to soft power intermediary in regional conflicts, from ‘fortress’ or border state of NATO to a bridge between West and East, to a moderator or civilization link between West and Islam, from solely Western-oriented to more proactive and multi-dimensional, even called ‘360 degrees foreign policy’, and lastly, from putting a strong emphasis on Europeanization to loose Europeanization with soft Euro-Asianism.

As the economic performance, which has gone hand-in-hand with democracy enhancement, gets better, – so does Turkish self-esteem. What used to be a dilemma once is now a source of leveraging. Turkey stresses that it is both European and Asian, both democratic and moderate Muslim, a product in the making. Inspired by the European project, it now provides new vision for the Middle East. At the same time, it represents a regional role model that is one of a kind and cannot be duplicated. It sends a

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\(^2\) The idea of AKP being more committed to Islam and thus increasing the Islamic orientation of the country once it obtains sufficient power. It is connected with concerns over Erdogan’s creping authoritarianism and AKP’s neo-Ottoman/imperial ambitions, suppressing the freedom of press and opposition etc.

\(^3\) May it be its booming economy, security ally, energy junction, young relatively well educated population, or international implications of tighter relations with this multifaceted, Muslim, state.
message both to West and East. To the West it communicates that democracy and Islam are compatible. To the East it conveys that political and economic reforms are necessary. It promotes a new horizon in international relations: one that is based on values of humanitarianism, balance between security and freedom and ‘zero problems with neighbours’ as well as on rational and active diplomacy. And on this foundation it aims to create a global community of shared interest, based on a realist view of balance of power as well as a liberal idea of opening and interdependence. In addition, Turkish foreign policy is a combination of its geo-strategic position, historical and ideological considerations – which are providing ‘strategic depth’ (meaning the region’s know-how or ‘unique understanding of the Middle East’) - and public opinion. Indeed the Turkish state has become a proud, ambitious and initiative player, and a highly skillful communicator in foreign affairs. Its ability to talk to all sides has given it the role of a conflict mediator which was lost due to ‘Arab Spring’ realities. But that is a sacrifice which Ankara had to make, in order to be on the right side in ‘the flow of history’ (Davutoglu, 2012). Hence the Republic of Turkey has become more confident and active, voicing its opinions loud when “enough is enough” (in relation to Israel, Egypt, and Syria).

There is a definite connection between Turkey moving closer to its Arab neighbours and the influence of the European Union. But the connection is not about choosing sides; on the contrary, EU proximity is an asset for Turkey in terms of its image in the region and the world, and with regards to domestic developments.

Sources


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